How to... Disclose in the Heat of the Moment

Telling someone that you have HIV requires a different tact when disclosure is spontaneous.

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We've all been there—face-to-face with a potential sexual partner who doesn't yet know you're HIV positive.

Do you keep your mouth shut and run away, or do you lay it on the line?

There's a big difference between telling a person you know well and telling someone you barely know (or someone to whom you hadn't planned on disclosing to).

If you disclose, will you be safe emotionally and physically? Will you be rejected or treated with compassion? Will it put out the flames or rev up the intensity of the connection? Unfortunately, there's no universal road map for disclosure—and no way to predict what reaction you may get.

But there are a few things to keep in mind when springing the news of your HIV status unexpectedly, especially if you're doing so when things have already become hot and heavy.

- Your tone has a lot to do with how people might hear what you're telling them. Being calm and matter-of-fact, as in, "I need to let you know something important about my health…" can help inform their reaction and minimize their fears.
- If you are well educated about HIV and how it is—and is not—transmitted, you'll be able to answer questions with confidence. It's also a good idea to keep some third-party information on hand (like a pamphlet from an AIDS service organization or doctor's office) and links to HIV-related websites (like poz.com and AIDSmeds.com).
- Be sure that you will be emotionally and physically safe. If you're telling someone you don't know well, it's harder to discern whether he or she can be trusted. If you don't want someone to

broadcast your status around town, you may want to wait until you know that person better before spilling the beans. Hearing that you are HIV positive can create a wide variety of responses, including anger. So, be sure you're in a location you can leave if you feel physically threatened.

- Don't think only about the emotional and physical well-being of other people; you have a right to be treated with respect and to know if others are aware of any sexually transmitted infections (STIs) they may have. Do not be afraid to turn the spotlight around and inquire about the date and result of their last tests for HIV and other STIs.
- Beware the sympathy reaction that can later turn to remorse. Sometimes, upon first hearing that you are HIV positive, people will react by wanting to get emotionally and/or physically closer to you. Cuddling by your side while hearing tales of your diagnosis and life with the virus can understandably engender empathy. Know that sometimes, after people step away from the intimate situation, they may experience a different perspective, one that includes considering their own safety and health; that's when people can be a little less compassionate. However, if people are initially sympathetic, the "recoil reaction" will often pass and they'll return to a place of understanding or closeness. But it can be painful to experience their running away and then having to wait for their return.
- Don't take people's reactions personally. Remember, they are reacting to the virus, not to you. Their reaction has largely to do with their knowledge of and experiences with HIV/AIDS—and not necessarily how they feel about you or whether or not they are attracted to you sexually.
- Be prepared to have safer sex if the person hears the news and wants to continue to be close. There is nothing wrong—and everything right—about being armed with an arsenal of safer-sex tools, from condoms to dental dams.
- Feel free to say "no." Just because people accept your diagnosis doesn't mean you're obliged to have sex with them.
- Know the laws of your home state. Many states require that HIV-positive people disclose their HIV status to a sexual partner before having sex. If you fail to do so in certain states, your sex partner can bring criminal charges against you if you have unprotected sex without first

disclosing. Some states will prosecute people for non-disclosure even if a condom was used and even if HIV was not transmitted.

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